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FOREIGN NATIONAL PLEADS GUILTY TO CONSPIRACY AND ALIEN SMUGGLING CHARGES

WASHINGTON – A Ghanaian man pleaded guilty today to charges of conspiracy and alien smuggling in connection with his role in smuggling East Africans into the United States, Acting Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division Matthew Friedrich, U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia Jeffrey A. Taylor and Assistant Secretary of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Julie L. Myers announced.

According to plea documents, Mohammed Kamel Ibrahim, a/k/a “Hakim,” 27, a native of Ghana and naturalized citizen of Mexico, admitted he operated an alien-smuggling organization in Mexico that moved unauthorized aliens across the southern U.S. border since as early as 2005. Based in Mexico City, Ibrahim’s organization was part of an elaborate smuggling pipeline that specialized in smuggling aliens from East Africa. Spanning multiple continents, the smuggling network included recruiters in Africa, smugglers in South and Central America, a corrupt embassy employee in Belize, and transporters, guides and money collectors in Mexico. At various times, the network’s smuggling routes included the countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Cuba, Brazil, Bolivia, Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico.

Ibrahim admitted that in 2006 he began working with Sampson Lovelace Boateng, a Belize-based alien smuggler and document provider. According to plea documents, between June 2006 and February 2007, Ibrahim admitted he and Boateng conspired to smuggle unauthorized aliens to the United States by providing the aliens with fraudulently obtained Mexican visas. These documents, which Boateng obtained through a corrupt employee of the Mexican embassy in Belize and sold for \$500 each, enabled East African aliens to travel into Mexico and reach a point where they could be smuggled across the southern U.S. border by Ibrahim’s Mexico City-based organization, according to information in plea documents. After housing the aliens for several days or weeks in Mexico, Ibrahim admitted he smuggled the aliens to the United States by various means, including by concealing the aliens for more than 12 hours in the sleeper compartments of commercial buses. By the time they reached the United States, aliens paid Ibrahim and Boateng smuggling fees totaling approximately \$5,000, according to plea documents. In pleading guilty, both Ibrahim and Boateng admitted to smuggling between 25 and 99 aliens into the United States.

Plea documents show that Ibrahim and his co-conspirators used a number of legitimate services to carry out the alien-smuggling conspiracy. The organization received payments via money transfers, sent fraudulent travel documents through commercial shipping services and conducted business by e-mail. According to information contained in the plea documents, on Oct. 24, 2006, for example, Ibrahim responded to an e-mail from an associate who inquired about bringing individuals into the United States without identifying themselves to U.S. offices.

Ibrahim responded to the associate that bringing these individuals into the United States was “no problem at all,” and stated, “that is what I do best.”

“With a network that included East Africa and South and Central America, Mohammed Ibrahim was willing to bring anyone into the United States for profit,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Matthew Friedrich. “Transnational smuggling organizations such as his are rightly viewed as a threat to national security, and will be vigorously prosecuted.”

“Today’s plea illustrates our commitment to thwarting alien smuggling operations, which not only violate our laws but also threaten our national security,” said U.S. Attorney Jeffrey A. Taylor. “As in our war on terrorism, the most effective means of dismantling large-scale transnational smuggling organizations is by attacking the problem where it arises – in the source and transit countries where these smuggling organizations are based.”

“Smugglers like Ibrahim and his co-defendants have no regard for the law, and put their personal greed ahead of the safety and security of the citizens of the U.S. and Mexico,” said Julie L. Myers, Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary for ICE. “Following his extradition from Mexico in April of this year, Ibrahim now faces justice in the United States for his crimes.”

Ibrahim pleaded guilty in the District of Columbia before U.S. District Judge Ricardo M. Urbina to one count of conspiracy and three counts of bringing aliens to the United States for profit. At sentencing, scheduled for Jan. 22, 2009, he faces five to 15 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

Ibrahim and Boateng were charged in a 28-count indictment returned by a federal grand jury in the District of Columbia on Oct. 31, 2007, and unsealed on Dec. 5, 2007. Boateng was arrested on Nov. 5, 2007, and pleaded guilty to conspiracy and alien-smuggling charges in the District of Columbia on April 22, 2008. Ibrahim was arrested by Mexican authorities in Mexico City on Dec. 5, 2007, and extradited to the United States on April 24, 2008. Both defendants are detained pending sentencing and will be removed from the United States upon completion of their sentences.

The case was prosecuted by Trial Attorney Brian Rogers of the Criminal Division’s Domestic Security Section and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Jay Bratt, Colleen Covell and Michael Harvey of the District of Columbia. Valuable assistance was provided by Attorney Mary Ann Snow and paralegal Rachel Estabrook of the Criminal Division’s Office of International Affairs.

The investigation was conducted by ICE’s Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., offices, with assistance from the ICE Attaché in Mexico City, the ICE Attaché in Guatemala City, the Diplomatic Security Office of the U.S. Embassy in Belize and the Drug Enforcement Administration Attaché in Belize. Valuable support was provided by U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the ICE Forensic Document Laboratory. Mexican and Belizean authorities also provided substantial support to the investigation.

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